

## The Delicate Beast

**Roger Celestin**

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In Roger Celestin's haunting novel *The Delicate Beast*, a man's early experiences in the Tropical Republic are contrasted with his life in exile in the United States and Europe.

A boy grows up in the Tropical Republic in the 1950s, where his grandfather and father are part of the country's national army. He and his brother enjoy a privileged, storied upbringing on their grandfather's verdant estate. But beyond this serene setting is a dictator, the Mortician, a "country doctor" dressed in somber attire. The Mortician and his enforcers usher in an era of surveillance and despotic brutality. As members of the elite class, the boy and his family are forced to emigrate to New York.

At first lyrical and languid, the prose captures the happier rhythms of the boy's early childhood. With the Mortician's rise to power, the narrative accelerates and tightens yet retains its eloquent flow. The sense of displaced community among Tropical Republic refugees is conveyed with detached compassion as the exiles adjust to crowded urban landscapes and continue to fear the Mortician's spies, even in America.

The latter part of the novel picks up when the boy is twenty-two years old, identifying him now as Robert. From the 1970s through the 1990s, Robert's art history studies, European travels, academic career, marriage, and family relationships are detailed; all are impacted by the distanced self-preservation that stems from his turbulent, uprooted youth. Beyond Robert's experiences are restrained references to other crises, including the AIDS epidemic, violence in Lebanon and Sarajevo, the Oklahoma City terrorist bombings, and the impending horrors of 9/11.

Unsettling yet sensual, the evocative novel *The Delicate Beast* contemplates the personal and social aftereffects of history's continued cycles of conflict.

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